



The Night Before (I'll keep you safe) by LiaGwriter

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Summary: Tomorrow, Mike knows he'll have to say goodbye. He'll have to face the fact that El will be gone, again. But tonight, they can stretch the hours out a little longer. They can be sheltered in the place where it all began: the fort.

The Night Before (I'll keep you safe)

Hi everyone! I'm back with another fluffy (and also kind of angsty, for all of my angst people!) Mileven one-shot! I've had this idea for a couple of weeks now and it just wouldn't leave me alone, so here we are. Enjoy 3

Despite everything that had happened over the past two years — from D&D campaigns to hatching a plan to fight interdimensional monsters — one thing remained entirely intact in the Wheeler's basement: the blanket fort.

Its first purpose had been shelter; a space Mike made for El so she could be safe, hidden from whatever bad things she was running from. Later, after her disappearance, he dutifully left it untouched: a concrete symbol of home, one that might help will her back to him. By the time they were finally reunited, he paid little mind to its presence. He couldn't find a reason to spend time taking it down, and besides, it was a good spot to read or take naps in.

So when El asked if they could spend their final evening together in it, he wondered if she realized this the way he had: that, unlike them, it remained unchanged, a tucked-away corner perpetually sheltered from the rest of the world. They'd been sitting across from each other on the couch in Mike's basement when she put her comic down and glanced back at it. She nudged his shin with her foot, causing Mike to look up from his own comic.

"Can we still read," she asked, pointing to the fort. "But in there?"

Mike shrugged. "Sure."

He tried to sound casual, masking the fact that the idea of being so close to her made him nervous — not because he didn't want to be, but because he was sure that would make it much harder to suppress his feelings about the move. The day prior, they'd agreed that they should spend the final evening doing something normal, something they always did; lounge on Mike's couch and read comics, watch movies — kiss, sometimes. Most of the time they just laid there,

talking, some part of their bodies always connected; El's feet on Mike's lap, his fingers running through her hair, her tracing a thumb over the top of his hand.

They both grabbed a few pillows and crawled into the fort, Mike having to hunch significantly so as not to bump his head on the table above. He was much too tall for it, which was becoming very obvious as he shuffled his way inside. El, too, had grown a lot since the last time she was in it, huddled on a makeshift bed in a house full of strangers.

It took some awkward maneuvering for them to determine that the best way to fit was to lie side by side, curled up and facing each other. When they were settled, Mike reached out to flip on the lamp next to them, so the fort was lit with a soft yellow glow. El adjusted the pillow under her head, meeting his eyes in a way that made Mike's breath catch. He quickly turned his attention to his comic, flipping the pages and pretending to search for the section he'd been reading last.

He'd learned pretty quickly that he couldn't hide when he was looking into El's eyes. It wasn't because he felt like she knew what he was thinking, but rather, that she knew when something was brimming, when he had more on his mind. *It's okay*, her patient gaze seemed to say, *I'll wait*, as long as it would take for him to get out what was on his heart. Usually, he did. But this time, he had to try as hard as he could to make the evening normal, to not let his emotions make El even more upset about the move, about Hopper, about *everything*.

He tried to make it seem like he was reading intently, but he could feel those inquisitive hazel orbs studying him and he sighed, knowing there was no way to avoid it. He glanced at El, noticing that she'd rolled up her comic and tucked it beside her. She looked especially beautiful in this light, her skin still tinged with the warmth of summer, her hair falling loosely away from her face.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, her voice gentle.

Mike swallowed hard. After the whole Hopper/Nana debacle (as they'd come to call it) they had a strict no lying policy, even about

silly things — even when the truth was difficult. But how could he say what he was thinking without hurting her, without ruining this peaceful moment? How could he tell her that he was afraid of being apart, of that awful, chest-crushing feeling of missing her again? He wasn't even sure there were adequate words, but looking at her then, he knew he had to try.

"Just... tomorrow," he said, resigned. "I'm — I'm scared to say goodbye."

El reached for him and he met her halfway, their hands intertwining and then resting between them. She tugged a little to draw herself closer, lifting her other hand to cup his cheek. Her touch made Mike relax a little.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm scared too."

There was a tense moment where their shared look threatened to tip Mike's feelings over the edge, and he bit the inside of his cheek to quell the tears he could feel stinging his eyes. He knew it would be okay to cry if he had to; let the reality of what was happening wash over him, the way it had been periodically since El told him about the move. But he wanted to do his best to keep the promise he made: that their last night would be fun, normal, light. Safe.

"As scared as you were when you were in here the first time?" he offered, a weak attempt at humour.

A small smile found its way to El's dimples and Mike couldn't help but mirror one back: that was exactly what he'd been hoping for.

She tilted her head down a little, as though what she was going to say next made her shy. "No, I wasn't scared then."

Mike frowned, genuinely surprised. "You weren't?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

She smiled again, and the hand that was resting against his cheek moved up, her fingers brushing the unruly hair from his forehead.

She studied him for a moment, her thumb tracing along his cheekbone, drawing a pattern only she could see. When she spoke, Mike could hear how constricted her voice was with emotion. "Because you left the door open."

Mike wracked his mind briefly before realizing what she meant — the moment when she'd gone to change, and he'd left the door ajar after sensing how scared she was when he tried to close it. He remembered feeling confused, and then a little sad at how frightened she was, her dark eyes desperate as they reached for the door before it could shut all the way. Thinking about it made him squeeze her hand tighter; an involuntary reaction, a reminder that she was there with him, safe for the time being.

"I didn't know about friends, or lies, or trust," she went on. "But that made me... I knew you were good, and I felt safe." She gave the fort a sweeping glance. "Not safe here, maybe, but... safe with you."

Mike's heart swelled and he leaned down to kiss her, the only thing that felt like an adequate response. El met his lips instinctively, continuing the slow trace of her thumb against his cheek. The motion lulled them both into the slowness of it, the gentle way their lips moved, like a silent conversation only they understood. When they broke apart El was smiling, but Mike sensed a tinge of sadness in it, the kiss itself imbued with the knowledge that time was running out — that the ability to be together like this would soon become a luxury.

He cleared his throat. "I promise I'll always keep you safe," he told her. "As much as I can."

Her features shifted then, a desperation clouding her eyes. Mike's stomach sank as he watched her, worrying he'd said something wrong, that he'd let too much of his fear and sadness seep through. "I'm sorry El, I didn't mean to - "

But she was shaking her head, rushing to correct him. "No, it's okay - it's not... you didn't say anything wrong, I'm - I just..."

Mike let go of her hand so that he could mirror her touch, reaching to cradle the side of her face. He swept some of the hair away from her

neck, and he could see that the motion soothed her. "It's okay," he said softly. "You can tell me."

El squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, as though the rush of whatever she was feeling was too much. When she opened them, she looked at Mike, holding his gaze like it was the only thing tethering her to the world. "I'm - I want to keep you safe, too. I want to keep everyone safe, but - " her breath hitched and she pursed her lips, collecting herself for a moment. The next words came out in a whisper. "I'm scared that I can't - without... if I don't have - "

Mike moved his hand so that his thumb brushed gently against her bottom lip. It was a silent plea for her to stop, to not let the words that scared her — that scared *him* — emerge.

"El, don't think like that," he told her. "You don't need your powers to keep anyone safe. And using them put you in danger." He studied her face as he spoke, searching for a sign that she believed him. "It's not your job to keep everyone safe, anyway. You know that, right?"

Her nod was almost imperceptible, but Mike felt a tinge of relief nonetheless. He began to run his fingers through her hair, using his touch to hopefully deliver the calm that he couldn't with his words.

"Whatever happens," she said, after what felt like a while. "We're safe, together."

Her words left him again overcome, and Mike used the hand resting in her hair to pull her to him, kissing being the only way he could convey all that he wanted to. Words felt too hard, the ones he wanted to say so badly rising in his throat: *I love you, El*. Sometimes the weight of them on his chest made it hard to breathe, threatening to emerge at any moment.

El moved her hand away from his face and stretched her arm around Mike's back, pulling him closer. They stayed that way for a while, trading soft kisses, Mike's heartbeat thrumming steadily in his chest as he tried to memorize the feeling of El's lips, the way she sighed, how he could feel her smiling against him sometimes. He knew he'd feel this again — he had to keep telling himself that, or saying goodbye would be impossible — but this was a moment that

deserved to be cemented in his memory; both of them curled up in this place that he made for her, the sanctuary from which everything began. The place where he gave her the name she now cherished, *El*, and where, without words, he taught her what home was.

Mike wasn't sure who pulled away first, just that in the next moment they had parted, their foreheads touching as they rested. The tears he'd been working so hard to hold back finally fell, slipping quietly onto the pillow beneath his head. He wasn't embarrassed to cry in front of El, but he was grateful that her eyes were closed. He could sense that maybe she was memorizing this moment too, and he wanted it to be a happy memory, one that would comfort her when she missed him.

It was so peaceful, lying there with El in his arms, tucked somewhere no one and nothing could reach, that Mike almost wanted to fall asleep. But it wasn't time for that, not yet — there was still an hour or so before she had to go back and he wanted to make the most of it, knowing that when they saw each other tomorrow, there would be no way to ignore what was happening.

Mike shifted so that he was lying on his back, keeping El's hand threaded with his. She did the same, and they lay shoulder to shoulder like best friends at a sleepover, talking about everything and nothing late into the night. El shuffled down so that her cheek could rest against Mike's collarbone. She lifted an arm and began to trace the flowery pattern on the sheet hanging above them.

"Do you think you'll ever take this down?" she asked.

It took Mike a minute to respond, entranced by the effect of watching El's fingers trace the pattern above. "Definitely not," he replied, laughing a little.

El glanced up at him, raising an eyebrow. "No?"

Mike shook his head. "I'm sure we'll want to hang out in it when you come back."

He could see El smile out of the corner of his eye. "What if we get too big for it?"

Mike sighed. "Well, I guess I'll just have to get a building permit to expand it then."

She burst into giggles and Mike couldn't help but follow, both of them relishing in the break of tension, the return to a familiar pace. He reached up to meet El's hand, intertwining it with his, and together they lazily traced the fabric, mapping out the makeshift roof of the fort. They did this for a while before he turned his head, leaning down close to her ear.

"It'll be here, El. Promise."

She nodded against him. "I trust you."

They passed the rest of the evening this way, talking quietly in the shelter of the fort, their words becoming slower and heavier with the onset of fatigue. When El left, their kiss at the door was more frantic than usual, the hours now threatening to close in on them.

When she was gone, Mike couldn't find the energy to trudge up the stairs all the way to his room. Instead, he crawled back into the fort, not caring how silly or childish it probably was. He wanted to be gathered up by the place that evoked El so strongly; that made him feel safe, a feeling now compounded by the knowledge that she felt that way with him, too.

His eyes heavy with sleep, he looked at the empty space beside him, shaped with the absence of El. The morning felt so far away, the idea of her leaving him again not entirely real. There, in the fort, he could conjure her so easily, reminded of the fact that no matter what, she would come back. She would always come back.

Please leave your thoughts! I'm fairly active on Tumblr so if you'd like to hop on over there to chat about ST/Mileven/anything & everything, please feel free - my handle is now maplestreet. Thanks for reading!